LOCAL ASSOCIATIONS

FOR

PROMOTING EUGENICS

BY

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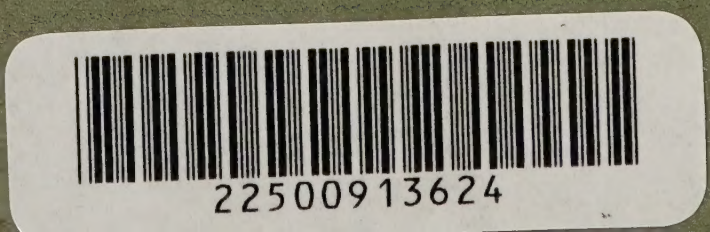

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LOCAL ASSOCIATIONS FOR PROMOTING EUGENICS[1]

I PROPOSE to take the present opportunity of submitting some views of my own relating to that large province of eugenics which is concerned with favouring the families of those who are exceptionally fit for citizenship. Consequently, little or nothing will be said relating to what has been well termed by Dr. Saleeby "negative" eugenics, namely, with hindering the marriages and the production of offspring by the exceptionally unfit. The latter is unquestionably the more pressing subject of the two, but it will soon be forced on the attention of the legislature by the recent report of the Royal Commission on the Feeble-minded. We may be content to await for awhile the discussions to which it will give rise, and which I am sure the members of this society will follow with keen interest, and with readiness to intervene when what may be advanced seems likely to result in actions of an anti-eugenic character.

The remarks I am about to make were suggested by hearing of a desire to further eugenics by means of local associations more or less affiliated to our own, combined with much doubt as to the most appropriate methods of establishing and conducting them. It is upon this very

[1] Address to a meeting of the Eugenics Education Society at the Grafton Galleries, on October 14, by Francis Galton, F.R.S.

important branch of our wide subject that I propose to offer a few remarks.

It is difficult, while explaining what I have in view, to steer a course that shall keep clear of the mud flats of platitude on the one hand, and not come to grief against the rocks of over-precision on the other. There is no clear issue out of mere platitudes, while there is great danger in entering into details. A good scheme may be entirely compromised merely on account of public opinion not being ripe to receive it in the proposed form, or through a discovered flaw in some non-essential part of it. Experience shows that the safest course in a new undertaking is to proceed warily and tentatively towards the desired end, rather than freely and rashly along a predetermined route, however carefully it may have been elaborated on paper.

Again, whatever scheme of action is proposed for adoption must be neither Utopian nor extravagant, but accordant throughout with British sentiment and practice.

The successful establishment of any general system of constructive eugenics will, in my view (which I put forward with diffidence), depend largely upon the efforts of local associations acting in close harmony with a central society, like our own. A prominent part of its business will then consist in affording opportunities for the interchange of ideas and for the registration and comparison of results. Such a central society would tend to bring about a general uniformity of administration the value of which is so obvious that I do not stop to insist on it.

Assuming, as I do, that the powers at the command of the local associations will be almost purely social, let us consider how those associations might be formed and conducted so as to become exceedingly influential.

It is necessary to be somewhat precise at the outset, so I will begin with the by no means improbable supposition that in a given district a few individuals, some of them of local importance, are keenly desirous of starting a local association or society, and are prepared to take trouble to that end. How should they set to work?

Their initial step would seem to be to form themselves into a provisional executive committee, and to nominate a president, council, and other officers of the new society. This done, the society in question, though it would have no legal corporate existence, may be taken as formed.

The committee would next provide, with the aid of the central society, for a few sane and sensible lectures to be given on eugenics, including the A B C of heredity, at some convenient spot, and they would exert themselves to arouse a wide interest in the subject by making it known in the district. They would seek the cooperation of the local medical men, clergy, and lawyers, of the sanitary authorities, and of all officials whose administrative duties bring them into contact with various classes of society, and they would endeavour to collect round this nucleus that portion of the local community which was likely to be brought into sympathy with the eugenic cause. Every political organisation, every philanthropic agency, proceeds on some such lines as I have just sketched out.

The committee might next issue, on the part of the president and council of the new society, a series of invitations to guests at their social gatherings, where differences of rank should be studiously ignored. The judicious management of these gatherings would, of course, require considerable tact, but there are abundant precedents for them, among which I need only mention the meetings of the Primrose League at one end of the scale, and those held in Toynbee Hall at the other end. Given a not inclement day, an hour suitable to the occasion, a park or large garden to meet in, these informal yet select reunions might be made exceedingly pleasant, and very helpful to the eugenic cause.

The inquiries made by the committee when they were considering the names of strangers to whom invitations ought to be sent, would put them in possession of a large fund of information concerning the qualities of many notable individuals in their district, and their family histories. These family histories should be utilised for eugenic studies, and it should be the duty of the local

council to cause them to be tabulated in an orderly way, and to communicate the more significant of them to the central society.

The chief of the notable qualities, to which I refer in the preceding paragraph, is the possession of what I will briefly call by the general term of "Worth." By this I mean the civic worthiness, or the value to the State, of a person, as it would probably be assessed by experts, or, say, by such of his fellow-workers as have earned the respect of the community in the midst of which they live. Thus the worth of soldiers would be such as it would be rated by respected soldiers, students by students, business men by business men, artists by artists, and so on. The State is a vastly complex organism, and the hope of obtaining a proportional representation of its best parts should be an avowed object of issuing invitations to these gatherings.

Speaking only for myself, if I had to classify persons according to worth, I should consider each of them under the three heads of physique, ability, and character, subject to the provision that inferiority in any one of the three should outweigh superiority in the other two. I rank physique first, because it is not only very valuable in itself and allied to many other good qualities, but has the additional merit of being easily rated. Ability I should place second on similar grounds, and character third, though in real importance it stands first of all. It is very difficult to rate character justly; the tenure of a position of trust is only a partial test of it, though a good one so far as it goes. Again, I wish to say emphatically that in what I have thrown out I have no desire to impose my own judgment on others, especially as I feel persuaded that almost any intelligent committee would so distribute their invitations to strangers as to include most, though perhaps not all, of the notable persons in the district.

By the continued action of local associations as described thus far, a very large amount of good work in eugenics would be incidentally done. Family histories would become familiar topics, the existence of good stocks would be

discovered, and many persons of "worth" would be appreciated and made acquainted with each other who were formerly known only to a very restricted circle. It is probable that these persons, in their struggle to obtain appointments, would often receive valuable help from local sympathisers with eugenic principles. If local societies did no more than this for many years to come, they would have fully justified their existence by their valuable services.

A danger to which these societies will be liable arises from the inadequate knowledge joined to great zeal of some of the most active among their probable members. It may be said, without mincing words, with regard to much that has already been published, that the subject of eugenics is particularly attractive to "cranks." The councils of local societies will therefore be obliged to exercise great caution before accepting the memoirs offered to them, and much discretion in keeping discussions within the bounds of sobriety and common sense. The basis of eugenics is already firmly established, namely, that the offspring of "worthy" parents are, *on the whole,* more highly gifted by nature with faculties that conduce to "worthiness" than the offspring of less "worthy" parents. On the other hand, forecasts in respect to particular cases may be quite wrong. They have to be based on imperfect data. It cannot be too emphatically repeated that a great deal of careful statistical work has yet to be accomplished before the science of eugenics can make large advances.

I hesitate to speculate farther. A tree will have been planted; let it grow. Perhaps those who may thereafter feel themselves or be considered by others to be the possessors of notable eugenic qualities—let us for brevity call them "Eugenes"—will form their own clubs and look after their own interests. It is impossible to foresee what the state of public opinion will then be. Many elements of strength are needed, many dangers have to be evaded or overcome, before associations of Eugenes could be formed that would be stable in themselves, useful as institutions, and approved of by the outside world.

The suggestion I made in the earlier part of this paper

that the executive committee of local associations should cooperate, wherever practicable, with local administrative authorities, proceeded on the assumption that the inhabitants of the districts selected as the eugenic "field" had a public spirit of their own and a sense of common interest. This sense would be greatly strengthened by the enlargement of mutual acquaintanceship and the spread of the eugenic idea consequent on the tactful action of the committee. It ought not to be difficult to arouse in the inhabitants a just pride in their own civic worthiness, analogous to the pride which a soldier feels in the good reputation of his regiment or a lad in that of his school. By this means a strong local eugenic opinion might easily be formed. It would be silently assisted by local object-lessons, in which the benefits derived through following eugenic rules and the bad effects of disregarding them were plainly to be discerned.

The power of social opinion is apt to be underrated rather than overrated. Like the atmosphere which we breathe and in which we move, social opinion operates powerfully without our being conscious of its weight. Everyone knows that governments, manners, and beliefs which were thought to be right, decorous, and true at one period have been judged wrong, indecorous, and false at another; and that views which we have heard expressed by those in authority over us in our childhood and early manhood tend to become axiomatic and unchangeable in mature life.

In circumscribed communities especially, social approval and disapproval exert a potent force. Its presence is only too easily read by those who are the object of either, in the countenances, bearing, and manner of persons whom they daily meet and converse with. Is it, then, I ask, too much to expect that when a public opinion in favour of eugenics has once taken sure hold of such communities and has been accepted by them as a quasi-religion, the result will be manifested in sundry and very effective modes of action which are as yet untried, and many of them even unforeseen?

Speaking for myself only, I look forward to local eugenic action in numerous directions, of which I will now specify one. It is the accumulation of considerable funds to start young couples of "worthy" qualities in their married life, and to assist them and their families at critical times. The gifts to those who are the reverse of "worthy" are enormous in amount; it is stated that the charitable donations or bequests in the year 1907 amounted to 4,868,050*l*. I am not prepared to say how much of this was judiciously spent, or in what ways, but merely quote the figures to justify the inference that many of the thousands of persons who are willing to give freely at the prompting of a sentiment based upon compassion might be persuaded to give largely also in response to the more virile desire of promoting the natural gifts and the national efficiency of future generations.

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